**EVALUATION OF THE NEED FOR A PERFORMANCE
APPRAISAL SYSTEM FOR
THE SOUTH TRAIL FIRE DEPARTMENT**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The South Trail Fire Department is a paid fire department and special taxing district that provides fire protection services for approximately 45,000 residents in Lee County, Florida. Increased growth and demand by citizens, as well as the makeup of the fire service itself has put pressure on the department to provide for better customer service both internally and externally. Citizens demand that employees be ethical, competent, and that officers be responsible. The South Trail Fire Department abandoned its performance appraisal system for all ranks within the department ten years ago, after years of scrutiny. The problem is that no formal evaluation process exists for employees within the South Trail Fire Department. The purpose of this applied research project is to evaluate what types of performance appraisal systems are being used and to evaluate the feasibility for the South Trail Fire Department to implement an employee appraisal system. Evaluative and historical research methodologies were used to answer the following questions.

1)   What are the goals and objectives used in current performance appraisals?

2)   What are the advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisals?

3)   What are other fire departments doing in the area of performance appraisals?

4)   What do employees think about performance appraisal systems?

The principal procedures used were surveys of local fire departments in addition to a survey of employees within the South Trail Fire Department. The local survey was given to twelve similar sized paid fire departments in Lee County, Florida.

A survey (Appendix A) was conducted at the South Trail Fire Department in Fort Myers, Florida. All company officers and acting officers within the South Trail Fire Department were surveyed. A second survey (Appendix B) included chief officers from various fire departments surveyed in Lee County, Florida. There was a literature review of material from the Learning Resource Center at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland as well as from the library at the South Trail Fire Department in Ft. Myers, Florida;

The results of this research indicate that there are advantages and disadvantages to performance appraisals. Most employees like the idea of having feedback and input regarding their job performance. The organization can also benefit by using goals and objectives as standards in the performance appraisal system. The major disadvantages appear to be the subjective nature of current performance appraisal systems and the lack of clear goals and standards. Fifty-five percent of the departments surveyed use employee performance appraisals. Most departments are looking for ways to improve their current systems. Most of the employees surveyed (55%) felt that performance appraisals would benefit the fire department. That percentage was higher among the chief officers that were surveyed. All agreed that the goals and objectives of a performance appraisal must be clearly defined for the appraisal to work. The goals should set a desired standard that an employee should meet based on department policies.

The recommendations include the establishment of an employee/management committee. This committee should develop, design and implement a new performance appraisal system for the South Trail Fire Department. The new appraisal system should strive for consistency and include a review of all job descriptions within the department. Some additional research into working performance appraisal programs should be explored.

In addition, strong employee participation with a periodic review of the new program is key to its success. A comprehensive training program with follow-up is critical in getting employees to buy into the process and understand it. The committee must explore legal issues associated with performance appraisals further. Finally, strong support of the program must take place by all of the officers within the department to ensure its health and success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Florida State Legislature created the South Trail Fire District in 1976. The bill of enactment gave the fire district its authority to act as an independent fire district in the State of Florida. A five person elected board of commissioners governs the fire district. Since 1976, the number of paid employees at the department has risen from 10 to a total of 67. Lee County, Florida has experienced an increase of population since 1976 of almost 400,000 residents. The South Trail Fire Department has experienced growing pains both internally and externally. The department now responds to over 5,000 calls per year; 70% are medical/rescue in nature. The demands of the residents for competent service and more services have been great. In addition, the response volume to medical and fire calls has increased. The amount of buildings to be permitted and inspected has also greatly soared. With these pressures, the board of fire commissioners and staff are asking the question, how do we know that our employees are the best? In addition, can we measure our employee's job performance in a better way?

In 1980 the fire department developed a standardized program to evaluate employees. In 1985 this program was abandoned because of charges that the system was not objective, that people were playing favorites and that there were no checks and balances in the system. A complacent attitude resulted and evaluations were just not getting done. Some chief officers refused to complete them because they did not buy into the method being used to evaluate employees. Currently, there is no system in place to evaluate an employee's performance. This also raises the question of how to mentor employees to be future officers and leaders within the department?

The district continues to be a part of one of the fastest growing communities in the United States. This growth brings about unique challenges that must be met by a proactive department.

The problem is that no formal evaluation process exists for the South Trail Fire Department.

The purpose of this applied research project is to evaluate what types of performance appraisal systems are being used and to evaluate the feasibility for the South Trail Fire Department to implement an employee appraisal system. The study used evaluative research methodology to answer the following questions:

1) What are the goals and objectives used in current performance appraisals?

2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisals?

3) What are other fire departments doing in the area of performance appraisals?

4) What do employees think about performance appraisal systems?

The principal procedures used were surveys of local fire departments and a survey of employees within The South Trail Fire Department. The local survey was given to twelve similarly sized paid fire departments in Lee County, Florida. A second survey was conducted at the South Trail Fire Department in Fort Myers, Florida. This survey was given to employees at a company officer training session. The goal was to evaluate what elements are contained in performance appraisals. Also, an evaluation of the benefits and disadvantages of performance appraisals took place. The first survey was used to evaluate local fire departments and their preferences. The second survey was used to provide feedback from employees of the South Trail Fire Department. Officers and acting officers were chosen because of their key role in implementing performance appraisals.

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 1976, responding to residents' requests for a higher level of fire protection, the Florida Legislature created seven new independent fire control districts. This action created the South Trail Fire Control District in Lee County, Florida. The district has experienced a large amount of growth in the past twenty years. The population within the fire district has increased from 15,000 to 50,000 within that time period. Over the years, growth has helped augment services provided by the fire district. The South Trail Fire Department has expanded its basic function of fire protection to many other areas such as public education, emergency medical services, and hazardous materials. The South Trail Fire Department has moved forward in many ways. Recently a company officer training program was implemented for the first time.

However, since 1985, because of resistance to change and previous leadership, no formal evaluation of employees other than probationary employees (less than one year) exists. There has been increased interest from the Board of Fire Commissioners for a more proactive evaluation of employee performance. In addition, with recent promotions and the possibility of many staff positions opening up due to retirement, concern has arisen because an employee's past history has no effect on these promotions. Currently, only the company officers do evaluations on new employees. Officers do not rate other employees on their shifts and staff officers are not subject to evaluations by the chief. In matters of discipline and promotion there are no performance appraisals to assist management in making decisions. There is no evaluation history in many employee files. In addition there is no formal mechanism for an employee to look at his/her strengths and weaknesses.

The lack of coaching was discussed in the Executive Leadership Course at the National Fire Academy in the personal development chapter. Each chief officer had to complete and

return a Professional Development plan that discussed at length the officer's strengths and weaknesses. The plan was used as a tool on paper to steer the officer towards achieving goals and learning how to develop his/her weak areas.

In the Executive Leadership Course at the National Fire Academy, chapter four deals with issues of managing multiple roles from a management perspective. These areas such as delegation, directing, and improving the organization are keys in all levels of management. It is important for everyone to understand how he or she can improve and enhance not only his or her personnel skills but also improve and enhance the organization. In addition, chapter seven talks about the importance of using feedback as a tool for personal improvement. "Any success you might experience as a fire officer will require that you take the time to evaluate your people and see what makes them tick… there can be no better advice to you than to tell you to study, listen, act, react and always pay attention to the troops" (Carter, 1993, p.10). The importance of this issue can help shape the future of the department internally. By establishing a method of measuring job satisfaction, problem areas, work habits, and improvements, employees may be able to respond better to the demands of the organizational culture. Employees cannot find the finish line without someone to point them in the right direction.

Employees today like to be included in the decision-making process. This is a key motivator for some employees. The feedback process, both negative and positive, can be challenging. "One of the best ways to keep employees happy is to establish a system of communications to ensure that their questions, suggestions and concerns are welcomed and answered promptly" (Scarano, Lazar, and Steckel, 1996, p.2). Fire service organizations must look at business and industry to help manage its employees in the future. In the Executive Leadership Course many case studies took place regarding why various incidents succeeded and

why some did not. Many leadership aspects were examined such as influencing, mentoring, and persuasion. In an employee evaluation setting many of these factors take place with employees. Along with the administration of the evaluation a mentoring and teaching process should take place. The setting of personal goals and objectives helps employees to realize the organizational goals and objectives. The South Trail Fire Department must evaluate and determine what process it can use to better guide its employees. This can only help the future development of the department and create an atmosphere of excellence for its employees and citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review was compiled from magazine articles, journals, published books, and written standards found at the Learning Resource Center of the National Emergency Training Center, Emmitsburg, MD and the library of the South Trail Fire Department. The purpose of this literature review is to establish a foundation based in theory for this study. The findings of the literature review examined different aspects of performance appraisals. Some of the goals and objectives were looked at as well as the advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisal systems.

Goals and objectives of performance appraisals

Performance appraisals have played a part in the fire service. Many departments nationwide have used performance appraisals, although the type of appraisal used has varied. Most of the literature suggests that performance appraisals are important in some form to fire service organizations. "Performance appraisals are management tools that may be used to direct and control employee behavior, distribute organizational rewards, improve employee work performance, or develop employee capabilities" (Tompkins, 1995, p.250). It is clear from

reviewing the literature that when a proper system is in place, a performance appraisal can assist an organization in controlling employees. In his article *Performance Appraisal-Lets Quit Appraising and Begin Reviewing,* Baches (1988) states, "the sole intent of every performance appraisal system should be to improve performance, to provide feedback on quality of performance and then review progress on the desired improvement of performance" (p.204). Other authors have stated that in general, conducting formal evaluations is one way of laying down a line of communications between employees and supervisors. If conducted properly the organization benefits from this performance appraisal exchange.

The literature suggests that performance appraisals should have clear goals set forth for its use. In his book, "E*ssentials of Organizational Behavior",* Stephen P.Robbins (1994) states, "Performance appraisals serve a number of purposes in organizations. First, management uses appraisals for general personnel decisions such as promotions, rewards, transfers, and terminations. Second, appraisals identify training and development needs, not only for individual employees, but also the organization as a whole. Third, performance appraisals can be used to validate selection and development programs. Fourth, appraisals provide feedback to the employees on how the organization views their performance" (p.228). Most organizations must use the best standards that apply to them. The organizational needs must be clearly stated so that the appraisal program can be designed to meet the needs. " The two primary objectives of a well functioning performance appraisal system should be: To formally measure the performance of the individual employee and to provide information on how well the system is designed and working. The formal measures of performance are used as feedback to the employee and used by others in management for making personnel decisions such as promotions and work assignments. The information provided by the performance reviews of many subordinates should be used

collectively to modify the inputs of the performance appraisal system in an attempt to improve its efficiency" (Baker, 1988, p.26).

Goals and objectives are methods by which job expectations can be measured. "Managers must be able to clearly explain the differences between goals and standards to their employees so that both parties know how they will be used during the appraisal process" (Maddux, 1987, p.169). A goal is a statement of expected results in the performance appraisal process.

" Goals can describe: (1) conditions that will exist at the end of a period, (2) the time frame required for the desired results and (3) the resources required to achieve the results. Goals should be established with employee participation and designed to reflect their abilities and training"(Maddux, 1987, p.170). This setting of goals and objectives is important because employees may not understand that their current behavior is not producing desired results. In establishing goals with employees it is important to remember that the goals must be obtainable by the employee. "The performance appraisal can be the most powerful tool a manager has to enhance a subordinate's productivity. Conversely, the performance appraisal system can stir strong feeling and conflict in the work place" (Baker, 1988, p.59).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Performance Appraisals

In reviewing the literature there were considerable articles that encouraged the use of performance appraisals. Most authors felt that the leadership of the fire service needs to embrace the concept of employee evaluations. The difference of opinion was to the exact method of how to accomplish the appraisal.

In his article *Succession Planning,* Coleman (1988) states, "The performance evaluation system utilized by a firefighting agency should include an assessment of a candidates potential for promotion" (p.24). This feeling was common among the articles reviewed. Another

sentiment expressed was the commitment to the department and its employees. "Good leaders have strong interest in personal and professional development of their people. They encourage their personnel to push beyond their limitations and give their personal best" (Reynolds, 1999, p.10). "You must consciously study your coworkers and get a feel for where they are coming from. Are they shy and retiring or are they brash and bold? Each will require a slightly different supervisory style" (Carter, 1988, p.19). This theme of obligation to the organization was one that was consistent in the literature review.

Most authors felt that the benefits of even a week performance appraisal system would outweigh the disadvantages. " The most effective managerial tool that can be employed by the fire officer to increase discipline is not punitive action, but counseling and training" (Coleman, 1989, p.20). In his article *the bottom-up performance appraisal,* Hymes (1996) states "Four skill areas are required for effective organizational performance: motivation, time management, decision-making and communications. The first three cannot be accomplished without good communication skills" (p.109). This theme of coaching was common and strongly recommended by most authors. The setting up of an appraisal system that allows for employee feedback and interaction was desirable. "A healthy organization would assist gifted personnel to find their way to a function that enables them to contribute to an organization" (Thorp, 1999, p.7).

Some of the problems with performance appraisals that were pointed out involved lack of standards and clear direction. " Without knowledge of the standards and a proper assessment program, employees are likely to perceive unfairness, subjectivity and bias in the evaluation" (Carter, 1988, p.19). "One way to avoid rater bias is to use a rating system based on a specific observable behavior and scored using symbols rather than numbers" (Booth, 1983, p.38). In addition, to these areas of concern in his book *Appraising managers as managers,* Koontz (1971)

writes, "It has been widely held by scholars of management and practicing managers that appraisal should be separated from considerations of compensation"(p.174). The feeling here is that bias would affect the pay of employees and if a particular supervisor holds a grudge against an individual, the employee could be harmed. In addition, some supervisors may gloss over the process because they feel that it would be too difficult to decide to take away or deny an employee additional pay. One thing for sure is that most authors felt that clear guidelines should be followed when institutionalizing a performance appraisal system. "The previous appraisal system used ambiguous words such as good, poor, and inadequate, without performance definitions to clarify the distinctions between the levels. Each of us would define these terms differently" (Paulsgrove, 1990, p.58). The previous quote summarized the feelings of authors in many of the articles. Many fire departments have abandoned the appraisal system because they found that the appraisals were too subjective.

In summary, the majority of articles felt that most of these problems could be overcome by using a consensus process between management and the unions prior to implementing a performance appraisal system. "We strongly encourage the use of goal-oriented performance appraisal systems. These systems have the manager and subordinate agree on objectives at the beginning of the appraisal period, and then evaluate progress towards meeting these objectives throughout the period" (Joseph & Susan Berk, 1991, p.75). "The fact that most programs fail is usually due to two problems: 1. The lack of training in rating employees and 2. Inappropriate criteria and methods for evaluating have been implemented. Supervisors should be trained in performance management, then prepare their employees for the process" (Moravec, 1995, p.81).

Summary

The research provided a clear understanding of the problems associated with starting an appraisal system that would be beneficial to both the employees and the organization. The literature reviewed pointed out the good and the bad aspects of performance appraisals. Most authors felt that with leadership and perseverance these issues could be worked out. The important issue is that for an organization to flourish and help its employees grow. Sound performance appraisal systems are another tool for the toolbox. Goals and objectives were keys in developing a good performance appraisal program. Employees need well-defined standards that can be met and understood. The literature showed that many programs fail when there is no clear set of standards in place. In addition, a strong training program should be used to help support the performance appraisal process and it's understanding.

PROCEDURES

<u>Definition of Terms</u>

<u>Performance Appraisal:</u> Is a special form of evaluation involving a comparison of the observed performance of an employee with a performance standard which describes what the employee is expected to do in terms of behaviors and results (Baker, 1998, p.25).

<u>Research Methodology</u>

The process began when management and the Board of Fire Commissioners at the South Trail Fire Department realized that it might be helpful to revisit performance appraisals after some disappointing promotions and the lack of employee history on file. The research was

evaluative in nature. Some historical research of South Trail Fire Department policies and procedures took place. The purpose of the historical research was to determine policies in regards to employee performance appraisals. Fire department records and policies were researched at the South Trail Fire Department in Fort Myers, Florida. Much of the evaluative research revolved around an evaluation of literature from the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland and the training library at the South Trail Fire Department. The research looked at a review of literature from various management books in the fire service. In addition, numerous fire service magazines and journals were reviewed for research on the topic of performance appraisals. The literature review looked at two main issues: (1). The purpose of performance appraisals and their objectives and (2). The advantages and disadvantages of utilizing performance appraisals in the fire service.

An initial survey (Appendix A) was taken at the South Trail Fire Department in Fort Myers, Florida. Twenty-two employees consisting of officers or acting officers within the South Trail Fire Department were surveyed. The purpose of this survey was to find out:

1. Do you believe that everyone in the department should receive a performance appraisal?

2. Should performance appraisals be used in promotions?

3. Do you think that performance appraisals are worthwhile for the organization?

The survey was given to a total of twenty-two employees (N=22). A total of twenty-two surveys were returned (S=22). The sample population came from the employees in the department who were either officers or had acted in that capacity in some way. The sample was determined by using the table found in the *Executive Development Course Student Manual* (pp.3-39), which indicated that since the population size equaled twenty-two, the sample size

must equal at least twenty-one in order to assure a 95% confidence level. All of the surveys were

given to employees during a recent company officer training class held at the South Trail Fire

Department. Surveys were handed out and collected at the end of this course after much

discussion on the topic. All surveys were placed in an envelope and tabulated at a later date

(Appendix A contains the cover letter and survey).

A second survey (Appendix B) was given to the fire chiefs of the twelve paid fire

departments within Lee County, Florida (City of Ft.Myers, Cape Coral, Alva, Bonita Springs,

North Ft.Myers, Lehigh Acres, San Carlos Park, Estero, Iona McGregor, Pine Island, Ft.Myers

Beach, and Lee County Airport fire districts). This group of fire departments is similar in size

and scope to the South Trail Fire Department. They face many of the same problems and

challenges brought about by growth and changes in the fire service. The purpose of this survey

was to determine:

    1. Are other fire departments using performance appraisals?

    2. What standards are used if any in evaluating your employees?

    3. How is the performance appraisal used?

    4. What type of performance appraisal is being utilized?

The twelve fire chiefs were asked to complete this survey at a meeting of the Lee County

Fire Chiefs Association. Eleven of the twelve surveys handed out were returned. In addition, the

fire chiefs that used performance appraisals were asked to mail them to the South Trail Fire

Department at a later date. A total of twelve surveys (N=12) were handed to fire chiefs at a Lee

County Fire Chiefs Association meeting and the chiefs were given one month to return the

surveys. Eleven surveys were returned or completed by telephone follow-up for this study

(S=11). The sample size was determined by using the table found in the Executive Development Student Manual (pp.3-39). This chart indicated that since the population size equaled twelve, the sample size must equal at least eleven for this population to fall within a 95% confidence level of a randomly chosen sample.

The manual cited Krejeceit and Morgan (1970,p.30, pp.607-610) as a reference for the formulation of the table (Appendix B contains the survey and cover letter used in this study).

Assumptions and Limitations

In the first survey (Appendix A) that was taken, only officers and potential officers were surveyed at the South Trail Fire Department. This group was chosen because each member of the survey was either a company officer or was involved in acting as a company officer. This group represents a diverse, well-educated and highly motivated group of officers. While a limitation, I felt that if a performance appraisal system were to be successful, the company officers and staff officers would be at the core of making the program a success. While not every employee was surveyed it was assumed that this random selection would represent a fairly even statistical analysis of the department overall.

 In the second survey of local fire chiefs (Appendix B) it was also assumed that the information provided was accurate, honest and objective. In this study it was important to get feedback on performance appraisal issues from similar fire departments. This broad range would provide for a foundation and exchange of information.

The surveys were limited in scope because of the population size involved. The surveys were limited to fire departments within Lee County, Florida. No private sector surveys were obtained. Another assumption was that the statistical analysis, although limited, was broad

enough to compile sufficient results. Both surveys are considered small in number. The time involved to get large numbers of surveys back from other fire departments over a six-month period proved difficult. The limitation of local departments was not seen as a major issue. If the South Trail Fire Department wanted to review further performance appraisals after this report it was not limited in doing so.

RESULTS

<u>Answers to Research Questions</u>

<u>Research Question 1.</u> What are the goals and objectives of performance appraisals? The results of question one were determined by the literature review. Various articles discussed what goals and objectives should be included in performance appraisals. Communication and mutually understood needs were important. Goals and objectives are methods by which job expectations can be measured. "Specific hard goals result in higher levels of performance than do no goals or a generalized goal of just trying to do one's best" (Maddux, 1987, p.169). What Maddux is trying to say is that managers and those in leadership must take the time to create performance appraisals with goals and objectives. Goals are something that an employee can really aim for. "The higher and more specific the employee's goals are, the harder the employee will try and the higher his performance will be"(Maddux, 1987, p.169). When establishing goals with employees, it is important to remember that those goals must be reachable.

Goals must be observable and measurable by those supervisors who evaluate the employee. In his article *Motivation and self-direction,* Carter (1991) states "If a manager wishes

to get the greatest effort from his firefighters, he must first find out what it takes to get them motivated and then supply that incentive" (p.23). Researchers generally agreed that supervisors should strive to keep standards and expectations consistent for all employee appraisals. "Organizations must have a rationale for conducting a performance appraisal program. The organization's needs must be clearly stated so the appraisal program can be designed to meet them. Many have been concerned with developing new appraisal techniques rather than with the more basic issue of what the appraisal program is supposed to accomplish" (Muchinsky, 1993, p.217). In setting the goals it is clear that they are an important part of this process. In her article *How are we doing,* Carlson (1997) lists five steps in planning the appraisal process " 1. Agree on the purpose of the appraisal. 2. Agree on what the board expects of the manager. 3. Agree on the frequency and timing of the evaluation. 4. Agree on who will be involved. 5. Agree on an evaluation form to be used" (p.7).

These findings sum up the various aspects of what and how the goals and objectives of performance appraisals should be. "The approach of establishing clear accountabilities, based on goals and steps leading to goals, can help overcome many of the obstacles that arise when one person evaluates another. An objective, thus fair, evaluation is usually based on written criteria" (Carter and Rausch, 1989, p.129). Most performance appraisals utilize policy and procedures in the organization to help shape the performance appraisals. The goal is to set a desired standard that an employee should meet based on standards. How the employee performs against those standards is the evaluation part of the appraisal that an officer must do. In most traditional performance appraisals, the supervisor conducts the appraisal. A form is used that the employee reviews with his supervisor. Goals for improvement should be set and communicated. The

following points from his book *Psychology applied to work,* Muchinsky (1993) identifies "six

elements of a professionally sound performance appraisal system.

1. Job analysis should be conducted to identify characteristics necessary for successful

    job performance.

2. These characteristics should be incorporated into the evaluation instrument.

3. Supervisors should be trained in how to conduct appraisals.

4. Formal appeal mechanisms should be created to reconsider any evaluation.

5. The performance evaluations should be clearly documented.

6. The organization should provide corrective guidance for poor performance" (p.223).

These points accurately sum up the most important goals and objectives to be considered in a

performance appraisal.

Research Question 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisals?

The results of question two were determined by the literature review. Various articles

discussed advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisals. The research showed that

there were more advantages than disadvantages using performance appraisals. The first

advantage deals with coaching. "The coaching aspect of the system cannot be overlooked, for

what good is it to know what is wrong if you take no steps to change things" (Carter, 1988,

p.20). This mindset is important when putting together an effective appraisal. A second

advantage is the recognition of the employee and praise. "A synonym for praise is recognition.

The more we recognize effective performance, the more likely it will be repeated" (Coleman,

1989,p.18). "The appraisal is also a powerful vehicle for reinforcing positive behavior. Our

experience shows that documenting a subordinate's strength is a positive motivator, and tends to

fulfill one's need for self actualization"(Joseph and Susan Berk, 1991,p.75). A third advantage

is documentation of an employee's performance. "The employees want to know what they are doing with their own future while contributing to the organization. The information should be made available to the employee on a regular basis" (Carter, Rausch, 1989, p.128). It is important in a successful program to show the relationship of employee goals, job satisfaction, and motivation. "People live to attain goals. Goals are what differentiate drudgery from careers. It is important that employees know what your goals are. It is equally important that you as the manager, know what their goals are" (Bruchman, 1992, p.50).

Some of the disadvantages identified in the literature review were similar. The first area dealt with the lack of supervision by company officers. "Managers that do not make the time to observe their subordinates in the work environment are forced to choose between giving their employees inflated ratings or lower ratings based upon insufficient information or casual observation" (Baker, 1988, p.44). A second more significant problem can be in the area of goal setting. "If unrealistic goals are developed and the employee fails to obtain the inflated goal, his faith in obtaining the next period's goals will be diminished. The goal must be observable and measurable by management so that the employee's increasing performance can be documented"(Baker, 1988, p.45).

A third common problem is poor forms and training on the performance appraisal process. "The appraisal system used ambiguous words such as good, poor and inadequate, without performance definitions to clarify the distinctions between levels" (Paulsgrove, 1990, p.58). These were the three most common problems found in the literature review. Most of the authors felt that with good management skills, these issues could be overcome.

"When evaluations or appraisals are done correctly, they can provide a wide range of benefits to the organization. The results can be used to determine training needs, identify

candidates for promotion and reward employees with merit pay. The feedback that is given to employees can help to improve their productivity and motivation. Performance appraisals are management tools that may be used to direct and control employee behavior"(Tompkins, 1995, p.49).

<u>Research Question 3.</u> What are other departments doing in the area of performance appraisals?

The results were determined by a survey of Chief Officers in Lee County, Florida. All of the departments in the Lee County, Florida survey were similar in size and budget. Most of the problems the departments face in terms of growth and motivation of employees are also the same. The findings of the local study indicated that many local fire departments are struggling with this issue. Only six out of eleven (55%) surveyed do appraisals on their firefighters. Only five out of eleven (45%) departments do appraisals on their officers. Those doing appraisals said that they did use standards in their performance appraisals. Seven of the eleven (64%) of departments surveyed said they felt performance appraisals are effective in the fire service. In addition, several departments responded, when asked what changes they would like to see made to their current evaluations. Two fire departments stated that they wanted to implement performance appraisals in the future. Two departments wanted to use the performance appraisal in the promotion process. Two others wanted the process to be less subjective.

Local Fire Department Survey Participant Characteristics

In this survey twelve local fire districts were asked to respond to this survey. Chief officers returned eleven of the twelve surveys. The departments all were within the Lee County, Florida boundaries. The departments were all similar in size and budget and all had mutual aid agreements with each other (N1=12 the numbered surveyed; S1=11 the number returned).

Table 1

<u>Survey Question One</u>

Does your department conduct employee appraisals/evaluations on firefighters?

N1=12	S1=11	%
Yes	6	55
No	5	45
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 2

<u>Survey Question Two</u>

Does your department conduct employee appraisals/evaluations on officers?

N1= 12	S1=11	%
Yes	5	45
No	6	55
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 3

<u>Survey Question Three</u>

If yes, how often are these evaluations/appraisals completed?

N1=12	S1=11	%
Monthly	0	0
Semi-Annual	1	10
Yearly	4	35
Every Two Yrs	0	0
Other	1	10
None	5	45
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 4

<u>Survey Question Four</u>

Do you have set standards or categories that the employee is evaluated on?

N1=12	S1=11	%
Yes	6	55
No	5	45
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 5

<u>**Survey Question Five**</u>

Is your appraisal/evaluation system used in conjunction with a merit pay or pay for performance?

N1=12	**S1=11**	**%**
Yes	2	18
No	9	82
Total	**11**	**100**

Table 6

<u>**Survey Question Six**</u>

Do you use performance appraisals as part of the promotion process?

N1=12	**S1=11**	**%**
Yes	4	36
No	7	64
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 7

<u>Survey Question Seven</u>

Do you feel performance appraisals are effective in the fire service?

N1=12	S1=11	%
Yes	7	64
No	4	36
Total	**11**	**100%**

Table 8

<u>Survey Question Eight</u>

What changes, if any would you like to see made to the current evaluation system used by your department?

N1=12	S1	%
Promotional Process	2	18
Better Employee Feedback	1	9
Not as Subjective	2	18
Planning to Implement/Future	2	18
Total	**11**	**63%**

Table 9

<u>Survey Question Nine</u>

Size of your department?

N1=12	S1=11	%
0-30 Employees	3	27
31-60 Employees	3	27
61-100 Employees	3	27
101-200 Employees	2	19
Total	**11**	**100%**

<u>Research Question 4.</u> What do employees think about performance appraisal systems?

The results to question four were determined by the survey given to South Trail Fire Department employees. The survey indicated that only seven (32%) out of twenty-two employees felt that it was important to receive a performance appraisal every year. Thirteen employees (59%) felt that performance appraisals should be used as a factor in promotions. Sixteen employees (73%) felt that they should have the opportunity to evaluate their supervisor. Twelve employees (55%) believed that performance appraisals would be worthwhile for the South Trail Fire Department. A total of fourteen employees (64%) felt that the current evaluation system for probationary employees was not effective. Most employees felt that performance appraisals would generate some feedback in a positive manner. Three employees commented in the survey that they did fear that performance appraisals could be used against them in areas of discipline. Sixteen employees (73%) felt that performance appraisals can be subjective and that was the number one reason that employees disliked performance appraisals.

Company Officer and Acting Officer Survey Characteristics

In this survey company officers and acting officers were given a survey during a three-day training session at the South Trail Fire Department. This training session covered various management topics including employee evaluations. The number of surveys handed out was twenty-two (N2=22). The number of surveys returned was twenty-two (S2=22). Each employee was given a period of thirty minutes to fill out the survey form.

Table 1

Survey Question One

What is your position within the South Trail Fire Department?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Officer	10	45%
Engineer	7	32%
Firefighter	5	23%
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 2

Survey Question Two

Do you believe everyone should receive a performance appraisal every year?

N2=22	**S2=22**	**%**
Yes	7	32
No	15	68
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 3

Survey Question Three

Do you feel that the current performance appraisal system for probationary firefighters is effective?

N2=22	**S2=22**	**%**
Yes	8	36
No	14	64
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 4

Survey Question Four

Should performance appraisals be used as a factor in promotions?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Yes	13	59
No	9	41
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 5

Survey Question Five

Do you believe you should have the opportunity to evaluate your supervisor?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Yes	17	77
No	5	23
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 6

Survey Question Six

Do you believe performance appraisals would be worthwhile for the South Trail Fire Department?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Yes	12	55
No	10	45
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 7

Survey Question Seven

How long have you been with the department?

N2=22	S2=22	%
1-3 Years	1	4
4-6 Years	3	14
7-10 Years	2	9
10-15 Years	9	41
More than 15 Years	7	32
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 8

Survey Question Eight

What do you LIKE about performance appraisals?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Provide Feedback	8	36
Identify strengths and weakness	8	36
Can offer praise and positives	3	14
Don't like them at all	3	14
Total	**22**	**100%**

Table 9

Survey Question Nine

What do you DISLIKE about performance appraisals?

N2=22	S2=22	%
Personal opinions (subjective)	16	74
Used as discipline	2	9
Poor training	1	4
Duplication (inconsistent)	2	9
Don't Like at all	1	4
Total	**22**	**100%**

DISCUSSION

The findings for this research study showed a direct correlation between the literature review and the surveys that were conducted. The literature review very clearly pointed out that the fire service is not embracing performance appraisals. However, most of the literature agrees that performance appraisals are important in the fire service. "Performance appraisals are management tools that may be used to direct and control employee behavior, distribute organizational rewards, improve employee work performance, or develop employee capabilities" (Tompkins, 1995, p.250). In the survey of local fire departments, this correlation was also found. Many chief officers (64%) felt that performance appraisals could be an effective tool in the fire service. "The performance appraisal can be the most powerful tool a manager has to enhance subordinate's productivity. Conversely, the performance appraisal system can stir strong feelings and conflict in the workplace" (Baker, 1988, p.59).

The literature review and the surveys concurred on many of the advantages and disadvantages of performance appraisals. Both surveys brought out the issue about performance appraisals being subjective. The employees felt strongly that subjectivity was a problem, with 73% mentioning it in their survey. This issue also surfaced in the literature review. "The previous appraisal system used ambiguous words such as good, poor, and inadequate, without performance definitions to clarify the distinctions between the levels. Each of us would define those terms differently" (Paulsgrove, 1990, p.58). It seems that this area must be addressed if the South Trail Fire Department is to implement a performance appraisal system. One way to accomplish this is with employee input and further research of other systems.

In addition, "One way to avoid rater bias is to use a rating system based on specific observable behavior and scored using symbols rather than numbers" (Booth, 1983, p.38). The

employees (64%) also cited that the current appraisal for probationary employees is not adequate. Some mentioned training and lack of objectives in the survey. This issue also surfaced in the literature review. "Without knowledge of the standards and a proper assessment program, employees are likely to perceive unfairness, subjectivity and bias in the evaluation" (Carter, 1988, p.19). The literature review pointed out a number of trends that compared closely to the results of the study. The results of the surveys showed that most employees and organizations believed that an effective performance appraisal could satisfy employees in the areas of feedback, helping to motivate employees. "You must consciously study your coworkers and get a feel for where they are coming from. Are they shy and retiring or are they brash and bold? Each will require a slightly different supervisory style" (Carter, 1988, p.19). In the employee survey 72% of the employees liked the fact that performance appraisals could provide feedback or help identify strengths and weaknesses as a form of feedback.

Some of the key issues that I see in the study are the fact that most feel that performance appraisals can work in the fire service. The remaining 20% are not convinced yet because they probably have had a bad experience with performance appraisals. This points out the need to provide employee input and for the organization to examine the entire performance appraisal process slowly and effectively. This would include setting goals and objectives that work for the organization. "Managers must be able to clearly explain the differences between goals and standards to their employees so that both parties know how they will be used during the appraisal process" (Maddux, 1987, p.169). The South Trail Fire Department can benefit from surveying its employees more often and using this process to help provide feedback on programs such as performance appraisals. A common theme that was brought out by the surveys and the literature review was one of continuity and inappropriate criteria. "The fact that most programs fail is

usually due to two problems: 1). The lack of training in rating employees. 2). Inappropriate criteria and methods for evaluating have been implemented. Supervisors should be trained in performance management, then prepare their employees for the process" (Moravec, 1995, p.81). There is an opportunity here for The South Trail Fire Department to do something positive. The implications are for the future of the organization and its health. The clearly defined performance appraisal can only help the organization grow and flourish. The management of the department must take the time to develop a good program that is goal oriented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the results of the research it is clear that the South Trail Fire Department would benefit from creating a plan for performance appraisals. The research clearly shows that the benefits outweigh the negative aspects of performance appraisals. There are some red flags that must be addressed. Clearly, not all employees feel that performance appraisals will work. Some degree of buy-in must take place at all levels of the organization. The department has to understand the process and refine it when problems occur. The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the need of a performance appraisal system.

The findings of the surveys and literature review support the development of a performance appraisal within the South Trail Fire Department. The following is a list of recommendations that the South Trail Fire Department should take to initiate this process:

1. Establish a management-employee committee that has representation of the union, management, and the various ranks within the department. The committee's main goal will to be developing, design and implementing a new performance appraisal

system for the South Trail Fire Department. The committee should look at making

clear goals and objectives a priority in the performance appraisal. In addition, the

design should eliminate as much subjectivity as possible. The committee may decide

to get some expert assistance by utilizing a consulting firm that specializes in this

area.

2.   The new appraisal should have a consistent approach across the organization. This

would help nurture inter-organizational comparisons of individual performers and

provide consistency when people are switched between shifts and supervisors.

3.   All job descriptions within the department should be reviewed and updated to

accommodate the performance appraisal process. Each job description should be

evaluated for current job tasks.

4.   Further research should take place in the area of performance appraisals. By utilizing

the Florida Fire Chiefs web site and database an exploration of those programs that

are working should take place. The department should evaluate programs that work

and fail. The committee should contact those in similar fire departments that have

appraisal programs and see what is working and what is not.

5.   Employee participation is a key in this process. The new appraisal should look at

providing two-way communication and goal setting as a method to get employees

involved. Greater personal growth and feedback should result.

6.   A periodic review and update with employees should also be molded into the

appraisal process. Most departments use an annual review; it appears that employees

prefer meeting more often. By conducting a progress report on a quarterly basis, the

supervisor has the opportunity to coach employees more effectively. This will also

allow employees to evaluate their goals and expectations and allow supervisors to inform employees of changes and warn them of problems in their performance. The appraisal process should develop definite time frames for reporting and evaluation so that employees do not fall through the cracks.

7. The department must develop a training program to familiarize all employees with the appraisal process. This will help give supervisors the necessary skills in setting objectives. The training process can also provide feedback on the system to help improve performance. Training will also help the buy-in process and organizational goal process from the management side.

8. All legal aspects of any finished product of performance appraisals should be explored. The areas of discriminatory practices and discipline need to be reviewed by the fire department's attorney.

9. The entire staff officer core must accept this process and help nurture it along. This is key in getting the company officers and the rest of the troops excited about this program.

The recommendations listed above will help the South Trail Fire Department develop its employees. The future leaders and officers need coaching and guidance. The performance appraisal process is one key method of completing that task. A fire department without a mission will perish.

Most of the employees want and need to know if they are doing a good job and where their organization is headed. A well thought out and constructed performance appraisal program can do that. A key to the success of this type of program is employee input and constant evaluation of the process from the employees. Once the (management/employee)

committee makes its recommendations, management should embrace and support the concept. In the fire service today employees are motivated by involvement. A performance appraisal will not only help the department in the short term but in the future also. The leaders of tomorrow need mentoring and confidence building. This tool will help guide employees to help achieve their goals.

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APPENDIX A

DATE: September 10, 2000

TO: All Company Officers and Acting Officers

FROM: Assistant Chief Intartaglio

       Please find attached a survey on performance appraisals. This survey will be used as part of a Project for the Executive Leadership course in the Executive Fire Officer program. I will be evaluating the need for a performance appraisal program within our department. Please answer the questions attached to the best of your ability. If you have any questions please see me. Thank you.

APPENDIX A

Employee Survey – South Trail Fire Department

Executive Fire Officer Program/Executive Leadership

Please circle the appropriate response

1)   What is your position within the South Trail Fire Department?

        a. Officer
        b. Engineer
        c. Firefighter

2)   Do you believe everyone should receive a performance appraisal every year?

        Yes   No

3)   Do you feel that the current performance appraisal system for probationary firefighters is effective?

                         Yes   No

4)   Should performance appraisals be used as a factor in promotions?

                         Yes   No

5)   Do you believe you should have the opportunity to evaluate your supervisor?

                         Yes   No

6)   Do you believe performance appraisals would be worthwhile for the South Trail Fire Department?

                         Yes   No

7)   How long have you been with the Department?

        1 - 3 years   7 – 10 years   more than 15 years

        4 – 6 years   10 – 15 years

8)   What do you LIKE about performance appraisals?

9)   What do you DISLIKE about performance appraisals?

APPENDIX B

FIRE CHIEFS SURVEY OF
EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SYSTEMS

This survey is being conducted as part of an applied research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program administered at the National Fire Academy. The purpose of this survey is to look at and gather information from different fire departments concerning employee appraisal/evaluation systems currently being used. Please answer the questions below as completely as possible. Write your answer below each question in the space provided. Thank you in advance for your participation.

1)   Does your department conduct employee appraisals/evaluations on firefighters?

        Yes _____   No _____

2)   Does your department conduct employee appraisals/evaluations on officers?

        Yes _____   No _____

3)   If yes, how often are these evaluations/appraisals completed?

        Monthly   Semi-Monthly   Yearly   Every 2 Years   Other

4)   Do you have set standards or categories that the employee is evaluated on?

        Yes _____   No _____

5)   If yes, what are these standards or categories? (If possible, please enclose a copy of your evaluation sheet(s).)

        _____

        _____

        _____

        _____

6)   Is your appraisal/evaluation system used in conjunction with a merit pay or pay for

performance system?

        Yes _____   No _____

7)   Do you use performance appraisals as part of the promotion process?

        Yes _____   No _____

8)   Do you feel performance appraisals are effective in the fire service?

        Yes _____   No _____

9)   What changes, if any, would you like to see made to the current evaluation system being used by your department?

      _____

      _____

      _____

      _____

      _____

      _____

9)   Size of your department: 0 – 30 employees   61 – 100 employees

                                                 31 – 60 employees   101 – 200 employees

                                                                    More than 200 employees

Optional:

      Department Name: _____

      Name of Person Completing Survey: _____

Thank you again for your participation!